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ABSTRACT

Hiring qualified reading professionals is a complex process involving a variety of considerations. The "Standards of Reading Professionals (revised in 1994 by the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee of the International Reading Association) provides a framework for the knowledge base reading educators should possess. However, other criteria also should be considered by administrators and teachers as they cooperatively pursue the best candidates: (1) form a language arts planning team; (2) survey the faculty to further determine their perceptions of the school's mission and its link to the new reading educator; (3) interview the best candidates; (4) observe the best candidates; and (5) develop strategies for retaining newly appointed reading professionals. These strategies do not guarantee the selection of the best candidates, but they do provide a reasonable sense of direction. The most important ingredient in these guidelines is the involvement of teachers in every phase of the process. (A checklist for the recruitment of qualified reading professionals is attached.) (RS)

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Guidelines for Hiring Qualified Reading Professionals

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Recently, schools in the United States have experienced a variety of changes, including an increase in teacher retirements, student enrollments, and reform initiatives. These trends have created a need for hiring about two million new teachers. Selecting talented educators, however, is not an easy task, and Arthur Wise, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Barnett Berry believe that schools may be hindering the selection and retention of the best teachers. (**Educational Leadership**, February, 1988)

This problem could be further complicated when hiring reading personnel because these professionals are expected to serve a diversity of roles. For example, a building reading specialist may be responsible for teaching remedial reading-writing classes, attending grade-level and department meetings, presenting model lessons in content-area classrooms, providing instruction for culturally diverse student populations, working cooperatively with teachers to order instructional materials, maintaining curricular congruence between the learning center and the classroom, and guiding the overall language arts program.

Fortunately, the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee of the International Reading Association has revised a document that can support the appointment of qualified reading educators. **Standards of Reading Professionals** (1994) provides a framework for the knowledge base reading educators should possess, and it highlights the following 9 areas: philosophy and theories of reading instruction; knowledge of language development, cognition, and learning; knowledge of the reading process;

creating a literate environment; organizing and planning for effective instruction; demonstrating knowledge of instructional strategies; demonstrating knowledge of assessment principles and techniques; communicating information about reading; and planning and enhancing programs. The new document also presents degrees of competence needed in categories related to the nine areas.

Standards for Reading Professionals represents a solid support system for hiring classroom teachers, reading specialists, and allied literacy professionals. Other criteria, however, also should be considered by administrators and teachers as they cooperatively pursue the best candidates. The following guidelines represent such cooperation as caring colleagues attempt to appoint qualified reading professionals.

Guideline #1: Form a language arts planning team. Since the hiring process is complex, more than one individual should be involved in the selection of candidates. This approach lessens the incidence of political nepotism and narrowmindedness because a variety of perspectives are considered. A helpful source is a language arts planning team, consisting of classroom teachers, library media specialists, administrators, parents, and (sometimes) students. The team's first task is to discuss the need for the new reading teacher in the context of the school's philosophy and goals. This initial attempt to match a prospective reading teacher with the school's mission is vital,

for it increases the chances of retaining the new teacher. If this process is overlooked, a serious conflict could develop between the school's real needs and the new teacher's perception of these needs.

To prevent such a conflict, the team can meet with the faculty to review the school's philosophy and goals and to discuss their relationship to both the school and prospective teacher. Thus, faculty members have the opportunity to modify the school's mission, to indicate additional concerns that affect the incoming reading teacher, and to demonstrate a sense of ownership in the hiring process. With this foundation established, members of the language arts planning team have a better sense of direction as they pursue a new reading educator.

Guideline #2: Survey the faculty to further determine their perceptions of the school's mission and its link to the new reading educator. Insights gained from the faculty meeting can help the team develop a survey concerning the school's philosophy and goals and their potential impact on the roles and responsibilities of the new teacher. The purpose of the survey is to objectify the staff's perceptions so that the team is focused better during the selection process. Thus, comments made during the faculty meeting may reveal a need for extending the philosophy and goals to include a whole language thrust. Similarly, the faculty may have suggested that the building

reading teacher to be appointed should focus on preventing reading difficulties and on supporting lifetime literacy efforts.

With this information, the team develops a survey reflecting these and other concerns. Usually, the instrument consists of items that represent pertinent areas, such as "assists content-area teachers to improve reading-writing instruction in their classes," "implements specific staff development programs," "involves parents as partners in their children's education," and "supports the lifetime reading-writing habit." In addition, a Likert-type scale can be applied to the survey's items, and a section for open-ended responses may be included also. This approach quantifies the staff's attitudes about the school's original and revised philosophy and goals. It also objectifies the faculty's perceptions of the new position to be filled and its related roles and responsibilities. After field-testing the instrument, the team administers it to the staff. Then, the results are tabulated and presented at a faculty meeting, where attempts are made to analyze the feedback and to establish priorities. Finally, the team writes a job description that reflects the priorities. Although this process is extensive and time-consuming, it demonstrates a genuine commitment to the faculty's continuous involvement in hiring a new and valued colleague.

Guideline #3: Interview the best candidates. Priorities established from the staff's feedback provide the language arts planning team with a sense of direction when interviewing

prospective reading teachers. After reviewing resumes that suggest suitable graduate work and professional experience, the team interviews individuals whose backgrounds are potentially matched with the school's needs. Effective interviews are both cordial and focused; that is, they do not resemble oral defenses of doctoral dissertations, but they do represent genuine attempts to hire individuals who are caring, dedicated, and knowledgeable. Applicants should also be able to describe feasible strategies for meeting a school's needs, and these strategies should support short-term and long-term goals.

For example, if one of the school's needs is to provide better classroom organization for reading-writing, the candidates are expected to describe how they would support teachers in their efforts to incorporate intra-class grouping procedures. Such procedures may include shared reading, literature circles, strategy groups, individual approaches, and whole-class activities. Similarly, if a school's focus is on creating a language arts program for gifted and talented inner-city students, the prospective reading educator should describe a flexible sequence of events concerning selection criteria, challenging expectations, curriculum development, classroom strategies, and evaluative considerations.

Since many schools throughout the United States are strengthening partnerships with parents, desirable candidates demonstrate an awareness of different types of parental involvement and also present strategies related to essential elements of effective parent involvement programs. According

to David Williams and Nancy Chavkin (**Educational Leadership**, October, 1989), these elements include (1) writing policies that justify the importance of parents as partners and that provide a structure for program activities; (2) stressing administrative support by designating funds in the budget, making available material/product resources to complement program activities, and selecting individuals to carry out activities; (3) providing training for parents and staff; (4) emphasizing the partnership approach to enable the staff and parents to have a sense of ownership through such activities as defining roles, setting goals, and assessing outcomes; (5) developing a two-way communication system so that parents and staff feel comfortable sharing ideas and voicing concerns; (6) networking with other partnership programs to share technical expertise, resources, and information; and (7) employing evaluative strategies at key stages and at the end of a phase. In addition to these elements, strong candidates for reading positions are aware of organizations/resources that support parental involvement in schools; these include the Cornell University Family Matters Project (Ithaca, NY), the National Coalition of Parent Involvement in Education (Alexandria, VA), and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (Washington, DC).

Although prospective reading professionals should be excellently prepared in their specialty and in allied areas, Sidney Rauch also believes they should possess those priceless intangibles that are difficult to measure objectively. In a chapter of David Shepherd's **Reading and the Elementary School**

Curriculum (IRA,1969), Rauch highlights such intangibles as insight, understanding, and a genuine love of children. Complementing these desirable attributes are Gilbert Highet's key characteristics of effective teachers: clarity, patience, and responsibility. (**The Art of Teaching**, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1950) Since interviews, by themselves, do not always reveal candidates' professional and personal attributes, observations of the candidates can provide more insight about their unique capabilities.

Guideline #4: Observe the best candidates. One of the most important aspects of the hiring process is to visit the schools in which the candidates are employed and to observe their accomplishments firsthand. If the candidates are serving as building reading/resource teachers, then members of the language arts planning team may randomly select colleagues and students to discuss the candidates' efforts in dealing with people, curricula, teaching, staff development, and other pertinent areas. The team also has the opportunity to ask probing questions that elicit valuable information about candidates' unique capabilities (e.g., insight, understanding, genuine love of children, clarity, patience, responsibility, and personal and professional reading habits). In addition, the team should observe specific outcomes associated with the candidates' efforts (especially teaching performance) to improve the language arts context.

Another concern of the team is likely to be demographic

trends and their impact on students. Specifically, have the candidates' accomplishments reflected sensitivity to the problems and needs of today's youth? During the past several decades, major trends have taken place which have affected the way children are reared. These trends include a higher divorce rate, more single-parent households, and a greater number of career-oriented parents. Thus, more latch-key children leave school each afternoon and enter homes with little or no adult supervision. Typically, these young people watch too much television, spend too much time on the telephone, and engage in other personal activities that displace or negate the school's efforts. Prospective reading professionals can show sensitivity to the changing home environment by having implemented in their schools a variety of programs that narrow, rather than widen, potential literacy gaps in students' lives. For example, candidates who have used substantial school time for pleasurable, independent reading have demonstrated an awareness that this major literacy event probably is receiving inadequate support at home and thus needs additional reinforcement in school. A strong candidate for a reading position manifests an acute awareness of and response to today's demography.

These effective recruitment techniques focus on experienced teachers serving vital roles on the language arts planning team, especially interviewing candidates and observing their accomplishments in their own setting. According to Wise, Darling-Hammond, and Berry, schools should encourage experienced teachers to become major participants in the selection process.

Involvement in all phases of the process provides for thorough scrutiny of candidates' educational philosophy and teaching competence. It also increases the validity of the process because local practitioners have a solid grasp of the responsibilities and demands of the particular vacancy. In addition, involving experienced teachers in selection increases their investment in the new colleagues' success; thus, upon being appointed, the new teachers are less likely to feel isolated and more likely to receive collegial support. These considerations are certainly more reliable than some of the traditional recruitment techniques which rely too heavily on candidates' college transcripts, haphazard interviews, and personal letters of reference.

Guideline #5: Develop strategies for retaining newly appointed reading professionals. After selecting the best candidates, the language arts planning team sends them to the central office and board of education for the final round of interviews. The next major task is to retain the newly hired individuals. Initially, they should be placed in vacancies that are well-matched with their skills, interests, experiences, and qualifications. Wise, Darling-Hammond, and Berry believe that this type of congruence is especially beneficial when it is complemented by a support system that assists the individuals in their initial years with the school. Regrettably, when educators are appointed, they usually are sent to problematic schools because the seniority policy allows the most senior

professionals to work in the schools of their choice. This policy often translates into the most experienced educators choosing to work in the least problematic schools, thus forcing newcomers to function in environments for which they are not well-prepared. Obviously, if a major goal in hiring the best educators is to retain them, then the current seniority policy must be revised; otherwise, the time-consuming selection process will result in failure.

One way of revising the current policy is to offer incentives to veteran teachers so that they remain in difficult schools. In addition, schools can support newcomers by providing them with mentors during their early years of service. In **Leaders Helping Leaders: A Practical Guide to Administrative Mentoring** (New York: Scholastic, 1993), John Daresh and Marsha Playko define mentoring as a continuing process in which individuals of an institution support and guide others to contribute effectively to the goals of the institution. A well-developed mentoring program, however, not only involves this type of sharing but also encourages listening and learning. Thus, potential benefits are provided for those who are being mentored, for those who are serving as mentors, and for the school that is carrying out the mentoring program. For example, new professionals develop more confidence concerning their expected competencies. Similarly, mentors gain more satisfaction and enthusiasm concerning the profession. Furthermore, as both proteges and mentors become more focused and energized, the school is likely to demonstrate greater productivity.

Although Daresh and Playko highlight mentoring efforts for administrators helping administrators, their ideas have value for newly hired reading personnel. Specifically, a master reading teacher from one school could be granted release time to work with recent additions to the reading staff. This approach acclimates newcomers (both novice and experienced) to the school setting and, if necessary, provides them with experiences that will equip them for a future transfer to problematic schools.

In retrospect

Hiring qualified reading professionals is a complex process involving a variety of considerations. The strategies I have suggested do not guarantee the selection of the best candidates, but they do provide a reasonable sense of direction. Organizing a language arts planning team, determining the faculty's perceptions, interviewing and observing the best candidates, and working toward retaining the new appointees are feasible considerations of the selection process. Probably, the most important ingredient in these guidelines is the involvement of teachers in every phase of the process. Teachers are more apt to work cooperatively with new reading professionals if they feel their opinions were genuinely valued during recruitment of the individuals. Although these approaches are time-consuming, the benefits are noteworthy because appointing the best reading educators not only can improve language arts instruction but also can enhance the entire school culture.

A Checklist for the Recruitment of Qualified Reading Professionals

1. When forming a language arts planning team, remember to
   - A. Include classroom teachers, librarians, administrators, parents, and (sometimes) students
   - B. Relate the new reading position to the school's philosophy and goals
   - C. Meet with the faculty to determine their perceptions
2. When surveying the faculty, remember to
   - A. Develop an instrument that reflects feedback from the faculty meeting as well as concerns of the team
   - B. Apply a Likert-type scale to the survey's items
   - C. Include a section for open-ended responses
   - D. Field-test the instrument before administering it to the entire faculty
   - E. Tabulate the results after administering the survey, and present them at a faculty meeting
   - F. Analyze the feedback and establish priorities
   - G. Write a job description that reflects the priorities.
3. When interviewing candidates, remember to
   - A. Emphasize the priorities established from the staff's feedback
   - B. Review resumes
   - C. Interview individuals whose backgrounds are potentially matched with the school's needs
   - D. Expect candidates to describe realistic strategies for meeting the school's needs
   - E. Expect candidates to reveal personal characteristics, such as insight, understanding, genuine love of children, clarity, patience, responsibility, and personal and professional reading habits

4. When observing candidates, remember to

   A. Select the candidates' colleagues and students on a random basis to discuss the candidates' efforts in dealing with people, curricula, teaching, staff development, etc.

   B. Ask probing questions that elicit valuable information about the candidates' personal characteristics (insight, understanding, etc.)

   C. Observe specific outcomes associated with the candidates' efforts to improve language arts

5. When attempting to retain newly appointed reading professionals, remember to

   A. Place the professionals in vacancies that are well-matched with their backgrounds

   B. Revise the seniority policy so that veteran teachers remain in difficult schools

   C. Acclimate new appointees (both novice and experienced) by providing them with a mentor

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